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ABSTRACT

Challenges and approaches for academic skills improvement programs for college students are discussed. Important prerequisites are a needs assessment and long-range plan and an academic skills improvement program based on theory and existing models. Identifying a set of supportive people with power and resources at an institution is also needed. Examples of such resources are the student affairs office and deans of colleges such as education. Academic skills programs also need to meet the needs of untraditional students through flexible schedules and modes of delivery. A realistic approach to testing issues includes developing new instruments that are sensitive to affective and cognitive domains. A further challenge is to change the perception of learning centers from just being remedial to places and programs that prepare students for the university environment. A model skills improvement program should be intermediary and interdisciplinary, based on theories (e.g., learning, cognitive, developmental and social psychology, semiotics, and rhetoric). It would also make use of instructional systems technology and instructional psychology and would conduct basic and applied research using both experimental and naturalistic methods. (SW)

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Academic Skills Improvement In Higher Education: Challenges, Issues, and Possible Approaches

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Reading and study skills centers, writing centers, learning laboratories and peer tutoring programs are as common as Pizza Huts and MacDonalds on college campuses. We have a plethora of specially and regularly admitted "underprepared", "developmental", "remedial", or "learning disabled" students who need the services of these academic skills improvement programs for various reasons. Even if the recommended reforms for elementary and secondary schools are implemented, the need for academic skills improvement programs for college students will persist and so will the challenges and issues facing this field.

Major Challenges and Possible Approaches

1. Probably the greatest challenge is for the universities and colleges in our nation to develop a theory of education that is appropriate for our modern world and to define the goals of higher education. For instance, what is the mission of a major university or smaller college in regard to academic skills improvement? What responsibility does a university have to students who are admitted, but who have not learned the rules of the academic game, cannot cope with college or perform on a level required for university standards? Universities and colleges are, of course, concerned with images and pressures. Recruiting and retaining students to fill undergraduate and graduate classrooms and football rosters, raising admission standards for the university and departments, putting students in "holding tanks" until being admitted to a program - these are behaviors that have an important bearing on the mission for an institution. Clearly, an institution has a responsibility to give a reasonable chance to graduate those students it admits and to be held accountable for learning outcomes. And clearly, our nation needs an elite of scholars from humble as well as wealthy homes.

But it is not clear what approach would be most effective in accomplishing the tasks of getting an institution to re-examine its mission and then to become committed enough to carry out its mission in regard to academic skills improvement. At present the low status of centers providing academic skills improvement services is evidenced by very low funding levels. Institutions of higher education provide little money for facilities, staff, research, equipment, supplies, and travel money for academic skills improvement centers.

From my own experience, I have found personal contact with supportive people in offices such as the Office for Academic Affairs to be effective. More monies (not enough, of course) became available because of close relationships with people who had the power to implement programs or changes after becoming aware and persuaded of needs. A needs assessment and a long-range plan for an effective academic skills improvement program based on theory, both basic and applied research, and already existing models that work is essential. Along with this is the need to identify both a set of supportive people with power and the existing resources at an institution. The Student Affairs Office, Deans of Colleges such as Education, various Centers (e.g., Research and Development), Institutes, and Planning/Development Offices and interdisciplinary programs are examples of such resources. An academic skills program may function best housed in The College of Education or funded jointly by the College of Education and another agency in order to attain the legitimacy needed to be effective. The Learning Skills Center at Indiana University-Bloomington is an example; it is jointly funded by the School of Education and the Division of Undergraduate Life, and its director holds a tenured faculty position in the Language Education Department. Defining the mission of major

universities concerning improvement of academic skills is a complex challenge requiring a complex approach. The approach involves collaborating with students, faculty, administrators and other university staff and realizing that under-prepared students must be a shared responsibility. Academic skills improvement programs cannot do the job alone.

2. Demographics is another major issue and challenge. We administrators, teachers, employers, and parents used to know whom we were educating, when and where we were educating them, and what we were educating them for. Not now. According to the latest census report, minorities of all types are increasing, especially in some states. Institutions of higher learning should see more minorities knocking on their doors - more non-native, more women, more older first time or returning students, more handicapped, more gifted, more Hispanics, more Blacks, more, that is, if these institutions are responsive to the financial flexible times/locations, and learning how-to-learn needs.

How does an institution and an academic skills improvement program meet the needs of these untraditional students? Drastic changes are indicated in assistance of all kinds. Flexibility is essential, I believe. This involves the hours when courses are taught and the location of courses taught. Weekend College Degree programs have proven effective at Indiana-Purdue University, Fort Wayne and Indianapolis; sometimes located on campus and sometimes at shopping malls, courses are frequently offered on business and industrial sites for credit or non-credit. Flexibility involves the mode of delivery, too - whether face-to-face individual, small group, or classroom instruction, or video disks, television, computer-assisted tutorial/networking, or correspondence courses with specially developed verbal and nonverbal print or audio materials. It involves outreach programs for elementary and secondary students, and elderhostel courses.

The drastic changes mean new perspectives and more money for research and development. But a theory of education appropriate for our times and for survival of our nation requires these changes. Whom shall we educate in this age of information? Are we prepared to stop being neglectful of our human capital? A theory of education must address these questions.

A new theory might encourage an apprenticeship system or it might use Britian's Open University's "distance learning" model - using video recordings of the best teachers and lecturers combined with individual learning packages. Britian's collegiate universities have low human resources wastage rates because of the pastoral care and counseling offered by tutors - a network of local tutors who correct and comment on students' work and meet face to face with them on many occasions. The tutoring and counseling are as important as the classroom teaching and lecturing. We might also make use of microcomputers as tools for mastery of subject and mastery of the learning process. What is important is mutual learning relationships - teacher/taught, author/reader, speaker/listener - the interpersonal, social relationships. Today we deal with the new kind of student from a different background with a different set of values, hopes, and dreams. Flexibility and commitment to develop their capacities are musts in a theory of education for modern society.

3. What are we to do about the growing reliance on tests - standardized or informal, teacher developed/researcher developed, tests to quantify levels of knowledge and to make comparisons among students and schools? Tests are being given to guage the effectiveness of universities and departments, teacher training programs, composition programs, and soon, no doubt, academic skills enhancement programs. Tests are used to justify policy initiatives and to attract private investment in universities. The primary reason, of course, is

to link university, state, or federal funds to measurable outcomes. Tests provide hard data about educational outcomes which can be used to make difficult decisions for funding and curriculum/teaching. But tests are limited in what they can and do measure, and we are all often guilty of overreliance on test scores. Tests often make no room for late bloomers, and standarized tests, since they are normed to a general population, may be biased against minority groups. In addition, tests are usually poor predictors of long-term performance and are oriented only toward cognitive skills.

A realistic approach to testing issues includes developing new instruments that are more sensitive to what they are supposed to be measuring in the affective or cognitive domains - reading and study skills, for instance. Tests used by reading researchers to measure reading comprehension and recall could be used as models and adapted: tests such as summaries of various types written for different purposes, retellings, and compositions. Graduated prompts, based on Vygotsky's notions of testing show promise of being useful in an academic skills enhancement program. We need tests oriented toward attitudes, beliefs, and mental states, too. Subject-specific comfort indexes and attitude measures give useful information about students which can be used in decision making and materials development. New models of testing are needed along with continued efforts to help students cope with tests and texts and become testwise and textwise.

4. A final major challenge is how to change perceptions of learning skills centers. Learning skills centers, and academic skills improvement programs should not be perceived as just being remedial but as places and programs that prepare students for the university environment. Students need to learn the rules of the academic game and be acculturated into the academic, student, and

support cultures of a university. Academic skills improvement programs and centers are in a mediating position between faculty values and student values and between administration values and student values. Much of the time when students are found underprepared, faculties and departments assume they are not at fault. The fault is shifted to the student and the problem is given to the academic skills improvement program for solution.

What would a model academic skills improvement program look like? It would be intermediary and interdisciplinary - based on theories (learning, cognitive, developmental and social psychology, semiotics, rhetoric, linguistics, reading, comprehension, measurement, etc.). It would make use of instructional systems technology, instructional psychology, conduct basic and applied research using both experimental and naturalistic methods and promote teacher-researchers. It would draw on resources - scholars and researchers from English, Speech Communications, Psychology, Education, content areas, the legal and medical professions, and vocational technology. It would reach beyond the university on local, state, national and international levels. It would offer a varied menu of credit courses, workshops, seminars, tutoring and counseling services manned by practicum students and teaching/research assistants. It would teach people how to learn how to learn.